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LOSS AND GAIN IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE UNITED STATES (1800-1916)

From the discovery and first explorations of the Western Continent, the spiritual care of the native tribes as well as of the early settlers was an important part of the policy of Spain and France, and was stipulated in the patents of exploration and settlement granted by these governments. Missionaries were sent with nearly all expeditions of discovery so that the natives and inhabitants of the new lands might be brought to understand the truths of our Holy Faith and become Christians. There is no doubt that, between 1550 and 1750, thousands of Indians were converted in different parts of the territory that is now within the limits of the United States; but the mission records and statistics that have come down to us are so meager that it is impossible to estimate the number of converts among the natives, or to follow their history, except along very broad and indefinite lines. One thing is certain: no country ever had more fearless and zealous missionaries—missionaries who labored and persevered amid dangers and hardships that tried their faith and heroism. American soil was generously consecrated by martyr blood. Yet, before the year 1750, the work of the missionaries was in great part destroyed; conspiracies, rebellions among the Indians, the uprising of hostile tribes and hostile colonists, the massacre of missionaries and Catholic settlers, and the dispersion of the survivors, tell the sad story of the ruin of flourishing missions and the shattered hopes of the Church in North America, before the middle of the eighteenth century.

However, it is the purpose of this paper to deal with the religious history of later Catholic immigrants and their descendants in the United States rather than to dwell upon the history

of Indian missions and Catholic settlements of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The problem before us is to determine, at least approximately, the extent of apostasies and other defections from the Church in the United States, especially during the last one hundred and sixteen years. Charges have been repeatedly made that the Church has not held its own in this country. That, compared with other countries, there has been a failure of organization and missionary zeal and labor on the part of our bishop and priests, and that, as a consequence, the number of Catholics in the United States today is five or even seven millions less than it should be. These charges refer almost entirely to the white population. It is a question, therefore, of the fidelity with which white immigrants and their descendants have clung to their faith, and whether the places of those who failed have been filled and are more than filled by conversions.

To solve the problem with any degree of accuracy, we must begin with some definite period and begin with sufficient knowledge of the Catholic population in this country at that time. Given the Catholic population at that date, its increase in the nation can come from (a) births, (b) immigration, and (c) conversions. Its decrease will be by (a) deaths, (b) emigration, and (c) perversion. If the elements of birth, death, immigration and emigration are correctly introduced into the calculation, and are set against each other accurately, the resultant figures will show how many Catholics should be in the United States in the year 1916 and enable us to judge whether the Church has lost more by perversion than have been gained by conversion. To determine the question of loss or gain to the Church in this country from its discovery, it would be necessary to know the number of Catholics that came to the various settlements from the first immigrations and the increase or decrease in each group from decade to decade, and the causes of the increase or decrease. Now the data and sources of information relating to the Catholic population of the old Spanish and French missions and to all other settlements within the present territory of the United States, say from the year 1600 to 1800, are so scant and indefinite that no historian or statistician has attempted to guess even the success or failure, the defeats or victories, the losses and gains, of the Church during that period, and it is not probable

that the facts will ever be known more fully than they are now. The statistical history of the Church's successes or failures during that period can no more be written than we can find the names, or trace the history, of more than a very few of the Catholic pioneer families of the seventeenth or eighteenth century. In only a very small number of places in the United States were there organized parishes or missions one hundred years ago; and it is during the last one hundred, or one hundred and twenty years, that church records and government statistics enable us to reckon how the Church has grown in this country by a natural increase of families and by immigration. Some of us have heard our parents or grandparents tell that less than one hundred years ago there was not one Catholic family in places that are now centers of Catholic dioceses. Some of the older men and women of today can remember the first Catholic family that settled in counties or towns that now have many churches and large Catholic congregations. Few of our congregations were organized before the opening of the nineteenth century, while many Protestant communities in all parts of the country have had organized congregations and church buildings since that time—an evidence that the Catholic proportion of the population of the United States was very small one hundred years ago, and that there were then no great number of Catholics in the country, and that those that were here bravely fought the good fight, kept the faith, and laid the foundations of a mighty Catholic Church in America. That there have been losses, all must admit; for men have fallen from truth and grace in every period of Christianity and in every country; but it has not been proven that the defections from the Church in the United States have been more numerous, in proportion to the Catholic population, than in other places, or so extensive as to be reckoned by millions.

In the absence of reliable data, or rather of almost all data, it is but idle speculation to attempt to estimate gains or losses before the time when the study of the composition and characteristics of our population was begun by the Government of the United States.

Between 1650 and 1750 there was little immigration into the colonies. The population of New England at the time of the

Revolution was estimated to have been produced out of an original immigration of about 20,000 persons who arrived before 1640. Franklin stated in 1751 that the population then in the colonies, amounting to about 1,000,000, had been produced from an original immigration of less than 80,000. Prescott F. Hall, in his *History of Immigration*, says: "In the thirteen original States the pioneers were practically all British, Irish, Dutch, and German, with a few French, Portuguese and Swedes. The Germans were Protestants from the Palatinate, and were pretty generally scattered, having colonized in New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland and Virginia. The Swedes settled along the Delaware River. The French were Huguenots driven from home by Louis XIV. The Irish were descendants of Cromwell's army, and came from the North of Ireland." Bishop Challoner, in 1763, estimated that, outside of Pennsylvania and Maryland, there were very few Catholics in the British Colonies. The number of Catholics in this country at the beginning of the Revolution is ordinarily estimated at twenty or twenty-five thousand. The first census was taken in 1790 and gave a total white population of nearly 3,920,000. At the time the United States comprised the territory between the Atlantic Ocean and the Mississippi River except Florida. Including Florida, the white population was about 4,000,000. Of these, according to Bishop Carroll's estimate, 30,000 were Catholics: 16,000 in Maryland; 7,000 in Pennsylvania; 3,000 in the region of Detroit and Vincennes; 2,500 in Illinois, and in other parts of the country not more than 1,500.

The first official records of immigration begin with the year 1820. From 1840 to the present, we have records including the countries, numbers, ages, sexes, and occupations of the immigrants. In the government records it is estimated that, from 1785 to 1820, the number of immigrants to this country was 250,000, and all writers agree that the great majority of these were Protestants.

At the time of the first census in 1790, Bishop Carroll estimated the Catholic population of the United States at 30,000. Between 1800 and 1820, Florida, Louisiana, and the West, with a Catholic population, according to Archbishop Maréchal, of 75,000, had been added to the territory of the United States.

The population of the country increased about 35 per cent in each decade from 1790 to 1820. If we increase Bishop Carroll's estimate of 30,000, which is considered low, to 40,000, it would amount (at 35 per cent for each decade) to 98,000 in 1820, and adding the 75,000 in the acquired territory and 70,000 gained by immigration, we can estimate the total Catholic population in 1820 at 243,000, and that figure is assumed as the basis of the following computation.

To ascertain the real increase of the Catholic population from this period to 1916, we must find the excess of births over deaths (natural increase) among Catholics, and the excess of Catholic immigrants over Catholic emigrants. The natural increase (by births) of the total population is found by deducting the increase by immigration from the total increase at the end of the ten-year period. The percentage of that increase from 1900 to 1910 for the total white population was about 22.3 per cent. That percentage has been raised to 25 per cent in computing the natural increase of the Catholic population during the same period. The percentage of natural increase in the Catholic population for any period has been determined by an examination into the excess of births over deaths in various growing dioceses in this and other countries, and by other factors thought worthy of consideration. It ranges in the United States in each decade from 35 per cent under the most favorable conditions, down to 20 per cent, and is modified in each period by the increase or decline of Catholic immigration. The increase by immigration in any decennial period is found by subtracting the number of foreign-born in the total population at the beginning of the period from the number of foreign-born in the population at the end of the period. These factors of calculation can be determined from the reports of the United States Census and the Commission of Immigration, and the process will give the increase by immigration during the ten-year period.

The Catholic increase by immigration is found for any period by adding to the Catholic population the same percentage of the total increase in the foreign-born population that will represent the proportion of Catholics in the countries from which the immigrants came. The number of foreign-born persons in the United States and the countries from which the immigrants came

can be found for each decade in the reports of each decennial census, and the number of Catholics among the foreign-born can be found by the percentage of Catholics in the population of the country from which the immigrants came, by tables similar to the following, one of which was made out for each decade since 1820.

FOREIGN-BORN WHITE POPULATION OF THE UNITED STATES IN 1900 AND 1910

Countries	Per cent Catholics	Foreign-born, 1900	Catholics, 1900	Foreign-born, 1910	Catholics, 1910
England.....	.056	842,078	46,556	875,400	49,022
Wales.....	.056	93,682	5,246	82,600	4,625
Scotland.....	.13	233,977	30,417	263,400	34,190
Ireland.....	.75	1,618,567	1,213,923	1,351,400	1,013,550
Germany.....	.37	2,666,990	986,786	2,242,999	829,909
Canada and New-foundland:					
English.....	.42	785,958	330,102	798,667	335,440
French.....	.90	395,297	355,768	399,333	359,400
Sweden.....	.0002	573,040	114	665,500	133
Norway.....	.0005	336,985	168	403,500	201
Denmark.....	.0014	154,284	215	181,500	254
Russia.....	.15	335,036	50,254	956,333	143,449
Lithuania.....	.95	89,060	84,607	164,766	156,528
Italy.....	.95	484,207	459,997	1,341,800	1,274,710
Poland.....	.95	383,510	364,335	838,120	796,214
Austria.....	.78	433,240	337,927	1,064,482	830,295
France.....	.90	104,341	93,907	117,100	105,390
Switzerland.....	.40	115,851	46,340	124,800	49,920
Holland.....	.35	105,049	36,872	120,000	42,120
Mexico.....	.90	103,410	93,069	218,800	196,920
Cuba and West Indies	.80	25,586	20,468	51,228	40,984
Hungary.....	.78	145,802	113,725	468,500	365,430
Belgium.....	.95	29,804	28,314	35,000	33,250
Portugal.....	.95	30,618	29,088	60,786	57,747
Spain.....	.95	7,072	6,719	37,344	35,477
South America.....	.90	4,761	4,285	12,889	11,601
Finland.....	.0004	62,638	25	129,600	51
Greece.....	.005	8,564	42	101,100	505
Pacific Islands.....	.40	2,049	819	1,807	722
Syria.....	.50	20,000	10,000	46,754	23,377
Atlantic Islands.....	.75	9,784	7,338	15,560	11,670
All other countries...	.30	12,577	3,773	172,515	51,754
		10,213,817 ¹	4,761,199	13,343,583 ²	6,854,838

¹ Does not include: Chinese, 89,863; Japanese and other Asiatics, 37,596.

² Does not include: Chinese, 70,944; Japanese, 71,722; other Asiatics, 2,936.

By means of these methods and rules, it was found that the Catholic population of 243,000 in 1820 should have grown by natural increase and immigration to 18,483,320 in 1910. The conclusions and some of the processes appeared in a pamphlet,

An Historical and Statistical Examination into the Losses and Gains of the Catholic Church in the United States from 1790 to 1910, published in 1912. In that year, 1910, it was apparent that if the Church had held its own there should have been 18,483,320 Catholics in the United States. The total white population has increased by births and immigration about 11 per cent since 1910, on the basis of increase from 1900 to 1910. The rate of increase is, as a rule, greater in the second half of the decade than in the first five years. At the end of the year 1915, a liberal calculation would give the percentage of increase in the Catholic population by births and immigration as 12 per cent. This would increase the figures 18,483,320 for 1910, by 2,217,998, giving a total of 20,701,318 at the end of the year 1915. The *Catholic Directory* for 1916 gives the Catholic population of the United States at the end of the year 1915 as 16,564,109—a discrepancy of 4,137,209. This, however, does not mean that, in the century and a quarter since 1790, over four millions of Catholics were lost to the Church. Many considerations forbid such a conclusion. There are today in the United States nearly three million Italians, including foreign-born and their descendants. There are more than a million immigrants from France, Belgium, Cuba, Mexico, and Spanish America. Not 30 per cent of these would be included in the parish or diocesan census on which the *Catholic Directory* depends for its figures. Yet these uncounted millions are as Catholic today as the same class of people in the country of their ancestors. There are, again, the non-contributing and merely nominal Catholics, who are usually passed over in the parish census. There are, too, great numbers of very practical Catholics, recent immigrants who do not speak English and who are not enumerated in the parish census though they are ready to make great sacrifices to preserve their faith and that of their descendants. If the *Catholic Directory* had an accurate enumeration of all these, the discrepancy would be greatly reduced, if it did not entirely disappear.

Then, too, the figures 20,701,318 have been reached by maximum estimates and allowances for Catholic increase. Catholics in the foreign-born population are estimated at the highest percentage that the census and immigration reports will allow. The Catholic birth rate is fixed in each decade at a much higher

figure than the general birth rate of the country; yet many of our people are not free from the evils of late marriage, and of birth control, and the preponderance of men among the immigrants is high. In the great Italian and Slav immigrations, only 33 per cent of the immigrants were women. The effect of such conditions on the birth rate and increase, while not definitely calculable, is very great. Add to this the fact that the government census reports do not include the foreign-born citizens who, with their children, return to the land of their nativity, or emigrate to some other country and live the life remaining to them there. They are necessarily treated in this calculation as though they and their descendants had continued to reside in the United States. The estimate, 20,701,318 Catholics in the United States at the end of the year 1915, is the maximum estimate that can be fairly made. It represents the number of Catholics that should be in the United States if there had been no defections, or if the defections had been fully made up by conversions.

The Church in what is now the United States began the nineteenth century with about fifty priests, fifty churches, and a Catholic white population of not more than 100,000. Catholics were then but emerging from the penal days of the eighteenth century; they possessed but the most meager civic rights, with but a few men of learning, wealth, or position, among their members; they had to struggle on through difficulties and opposition which only men of strong hearts and strong faith could overcome. When we study the conditions of Catholics at the end of the eighteenth century, and consider what Catholics did in this country during the nineteenth century, we must be convinced that they fought no losing battle. They could not have been weak in their faith, their bishops and priests could not have been wanting in zeal and self-sacrificing labor for souls, and accomplish what has been accomplished in one hundred years.

No body of Catholics in history approached to anything like the marvelous progress which this poverty-stricken, hard-working, unlettered, persecuted, Catholic minority in the United States made between 1800 and 1900. Churches, schools, colleges and universities have sprung up all over the land; institutions of mercy and charity are there to testify to the love of these people

for their fellow-man. There could not have been defections and apostasies of millions of Catholics, and at the same time a material and earthly progress of religious institutions and a Catholic virility that have not been surpassed in any nation or in any age. The stalwart faith and loyalty and piety of the Catholics of this country today, their unity and devotion to the Vicar of Christ, the position of the Church in the United States, prove that, amid the conflicts of the nineteenth century, faith and fidelity supported and sanctified the lives and work of those who preceded us, and ought to determine us not to accept without proof the statements of prejudiced minds that the Church has failed in this republic; that our losses have been greater than our gains, especially when we consider that our mission to those outside the fold and gains by conversion have been as great, if not greater, during the last one hundred years than in any country of Europe.

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